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Approved For Release 2004/10/12 : CIA-RDP80R01720R000600020071-2

[redacted] 12 December 1968

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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Indications of an Impending Communist Offensive
in South Vietnam

SUMMARY

There are numerous indications that the Communists are prepared and positioned to kick off a new wave of intensified military action any time between now and Christmas. Most of the indicators point to III Corps as the focal point for the upcoming attacks, particularly those involving infantry assaults. There are also some (but fewer) indications of preparations for ground probes or assaults at various points in IV Corps. In any event, though III Corps will probably be the primary theater of operations, the enemy may launch numerous mortar, artillery, and recoilless rifle attacks, accompanied by some ground action, on allied outposts and population centers throughout the country. Some sharp upsurge in Communist offensive activity is almost certain to develop within the next week or two, and one [redacted] reported that attacks in III Corps are scheduled to begin on the night of 12-13 December, i.e., during the late morning and early afternoon of Thursday, 12 December, in Washington.

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1. Background: The Communists have been building toward a large-scale offensive in III Corps for several months. Beginning in late August, main force Communist units withdrew from III Corps into base areas across and along the Cambodian border. Since then, these units have been receiving replacements for the huge casualties they took during the Communists' abortive "third phase" offensive in August. Their forces have undergone intensive indoctrination and are apparently now ready for renewed combat.

2. Attack Indications: Indications began to show up in late November that the four known Communist divisions positioned along the Cambodian border in III Corps were starting to move back into the provinces west of Saigon.

tions to renew offensive activity in III Corps in mid-December.

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3. These indications were fleshed out during the past week when allied forces making sweep operations through Tay Ninh Province met with heavy enemy resistance. This resistance suggested an effort by the Communists to deflect allied forces from major corridors traditionally used by the Communist divisions whenever they moved from base areas back toward combat zones around the capital city.

4. At present, the enemy has already moved one divisional headquarters from a base near the Cambodian border into War Zone D, a traditional Communist staging area for attacks in the Saigon area. In addition, up to five regiments have been detected moving into areas of III Corps close to allied targets. Moreover, there are indications that elements of up to three additional divisions may also be preparing for action in III Corps.

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5. Agency Assessments: In light of the indicators cited above, senior officers of the CIA's Vietnam station in Saigon made a tour of III Corps on 11 December to get a first-hand look at the situation and to review it with Agency and US military officers in the threatened areas. The station reported on the morning of 11 December (Washington time) that the opening of a

new phase of enemy activity appeared imminent in III Corps. The enemy's initial objectives were likely to include primarily military targets around (but outside of) Saigon such as Ben Cat, Lai Khe, Phuoc Vinh, and Bear Cat, though feints or attacks might also be staged against outlying provincial towns such as Tay Ninh or An Loc. The Vietnam Station felt that an attack on Saigon proper probably would not come until after the enemy had assessed the results of his initial attacks.

6. After MACV's detailed 11 December review of all current indicators

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[redacted] was received in Washington (MAC 16964), the Vietnam Station was asked to review the bidding once again. On 12 December the station reaffirmed its assessment outlined above and re-emphasized that there are strong indications from all four corps areas that the period between now and Christmas will see an intensification of attacks by fire against military installations in outlying areas or on the outskirts of cities accompanied by ground probes and sapper incidents in some cases. Whether these attacks will be followed by ground attacks against the cities themselves will probably depend on the Communists' assessment of the initial phase of their offensive action. These field views are shared by CIA Headquarters and hence reflect the Agency's assessment.

7. Timing: The best estimate for the first phase of the impending Communist offensive is the period 12-14 December. As MACV notes, one reliable agent has reported that COSVN has set the time for the night of 12-13 December (which would be the late morning and early afternoon of Thursday, 12 December, in Washington). If the Communists opt to carry through into the second phase, the best estimate for any attack on Saigon is the period between 20-25 December. (The dark of the moon is on the 20th and there are three Communist holidays between 19 and 22 December, with 19 December being the anniversary of the opening of the Franco - Viet Minh war in 1946.) Whether or not we see an attack cycle clearly demarcated into phases, all available evidence suggests that the enemy hopes to get a fairly substantial round of action off the ground prior to the three-day truce the Communists have called for Christmas.

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8. Communist Objectives: Hanoi's rationale for launching a heavy new round of military activity at this time is not entirely clear. The Communist leaders may believe there is little prospect for substantial progress in Paris during the remaining weeks of the present US administration. They may thus estimate that they have little to lose at the peace talks, and much to gain in the field, by stepping up the level of military action.

9. On the other hand, the North Vietnamese may intend fairly soon to make concessions on the procedural matters which are holding up the next round of talks in Paris. With this in mind, they may believe that a show of strength and initiative on the battlefield will provide the right kind of background music for the opening of substantive discussions.

10. In any event, the pattern of activity in Vietnam since the Communists began withdrawing many of their main force units into base and sanctuary areas in late August has worked to the detriment of Communist interests in several significant respects. For one thing, this main force pullback has provided an optimum climate for allied pacification and anti-infrastructure efforts. In addition, current activity patterns project to the Vietnamese and to the world at large an image of Communist passivity in the face of allied initiative and progress in South Vietnam. This is certainly not the image Hanoi would want events in South Vietnam to project when substantive talks begin.

11. Precedent, stretching from the May 1968 attacks that coincided with the opening of US/North Vietnamese conversations in Paris back to the all-out effort to overrun Dien Bien Phu (at whatever cost) as the 1954 Geneva Conference began, demonstrates that the Hanoi leadership much prefers to start talking from a position of apparent strength or, if possible, apparent invincibility. Furthermore, Hanoi must privately recognize that Saigon's progress and the patently obvious North Vietnamization of the war over the past several months have left the National Liberation Front's public image in bad need of refurbishing. If the impending attacks in III and IV Corps are even moderately successful from a propaganda point of view (whatever be their casualty cost), they will almost

certainly be credited to the NLF (not the North Vietnamese Army) and cited as proof of the Front's power and rightful claim to a predominant voice in South Vietnamese affairs.

12. Madame Binh and her NLF colleagues will, of course, claim full credit--while Xuan Thuy and his North Vietnamese associates disclaim all responsibility--for any attacks on Saigon or other cities. Still, Hanoi must recognize that any major attack on Saigon could imperil the continuation of the halt of US bombing over North Vietnam. If, nonetheless, attacks are mounted on Saigon and other cities, Hanoi will probably be gambling that world-wide hopes for peace and domestic US desires for disengagement will generate political pressure sufficient to inhibit the present US Government from "wrecking chances for peace" by re-escalating the war during its last few weeks in office. Under these circumstances, Hanoi's propaganda line at Paris and elsewhere will almost certainly be that any such attacks are the independent actions of the Front, over which the North Vietnamese have no control, and that any awkwardness in the situation is the fault of the "Saigon administration," which refused to begin serious talks on 6 November.